



KYIV-MOHYLA
HUMANITIES JOURNAL

KYIV-MOHYLA SCHOLARLY PEER-REVIEWED JOURNALS

Nicholas Denysenko. *The Church's Unholy War:
Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Orthodoxy.*
Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2023. xvii, 160 pp.

Author(s): Olena Chemodanova

Source: Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal 10 (2023): 274-281

Published by: National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy

<http://kmhj.ukma.edu.ua/>

Nicholas Denysenko. *The Church's Unholy War: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Orthodoxy*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2023. xvii, 160 pp.

Reviewed by **Olena Chemodanova**



Prior to the discussion of the revised book, I would like to point out to a broader problem that encouraged me to undertake this review: a very limited representation of voices about Ukrainian church history and its contemporary state in academia, especially among theological researchers.¹ The colonial past of Ukraine has influenced theological studies much more than those of history or politics. On the one hand, the once mighty Russian Empire built its historical identity on the myth of the reportedly Russian medieval state Rus. Consequently, numerous studies since the 19th century on the history of the Russian Orthodox Church (hereinafter – the ROC) traced the history of Russia from the 9th century Kyiv, while Ukraine or Belarus seemed to have never existed. After the Bolshevik Revolution, this historical narrative was carried westward by Orthodox refugees. Naturally since then, it has found its way into many studies on Orthodox theology. The primary goal of such studies was not to unveil historical truth, but rather to investigate the theological nuances of the Orthodox Christianity. So that even the 21st century theological academia can witness numerous articles and books where, for example, the 17th century Orthodox patriarch Cyril Lucaris visited Poland (1594–97, 1600–01),² or the history of Orthodox nations divided between Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs, Russians, Georgians, and others, without any mentioning of either Ukrainians or Belarusians, however. On this background, theological histories acknowledging the existence of Ukraine are quite rare and precious.

On the other hand, quite active and financially well-supported contemporary Russian propaganda is picking its fruits. Unfortunately, there are many English-language web-pages related to the ROC that produce fake narratives and false news about Ukraine, while the authentic voice of the Ukrainian Orthodoxy is still almost absent. This leads to the sad fact that some scholars perceive English-speaking Russian channels as a trustworthy sources, and even in 2023 there are still published academic

1 This review is a part of the research project “Dialogical Nature of the Orthodox Theology in Modern Britain: Anthony Bloom, Kallistos Ware, Andrew Louth,” Grant Agency of Charles University no. 291323.

2 In fact, it was a multi-national state Polish Commonwealth, and he stayed in Ukrainian cities Ostroh and Lviv and in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, for several years, never in Poland per se. See, for example, Andrii Smyrnov, “Kyrylo Lukaris i Ukraina [Cyril Lucaris and Ukraine],” *Naukovi zapysky, seriia “Istorychni nauky”* 18 (2011): 157–64.

books that praise the ideology of *Russian World* and blame either the Ecumenical Patriarchate or Ukrainian defenders with weird accusations for Masonry, Nazism, and the like.³ The complicity to the situation is exacerbated by the fact that the ROC publicly claims to defend “traditional values.” As a result, those Christians who are opposed to the LGBT-movement are very often trapped to believe the public stance of the ROC and support either the ROC or the Putin’s regime in general. While in reality, neither the Ukrainian Orthodox churches, nor Ukraine promotes the same-sex marriages as its official policy.

Considering this context, the new book by Nicholas Denysenko is of special importance. The author is already a well-known liturgical scholar, who obtained his PhD from the Catholic University of America in 2008 and has served as a deacon at the Orthodox Church of America since 2003. However, being of Ukrainian ancestry, in the recent years he changed his research focus from liturgical studies to the history of the Ukrainian Church, having published an important historical survey entitled *The Orthodox Church in Ukraine: A Century of Separation*⁴ in 2018. His recent book *The Church's Unholy War: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Orthodoxy* was intended to shed the light on the involvement of the ROC in the Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine and on the complicated religious situation in Ukraine.

The book is revealing in many senses. However, it also elicits comments and some critique. I will follow the structure of the book, emphasizing some of its most important insights and adding some critique if necessary. The book consists of introduction and seven chapters, the first three of which are written chronologically and the other four – thematically.

The introduction makes up a chapter itself and touches upon the crucial topics related to the historical myth of Kyivan Rus, the change of jurisdiction of Kyivan Metropolia from the Ecumenical to Moscow patriarchate in 1686, and briefly explains the foundational principles of the Orthodox Church to those readers, who are not very familiar with Orthodoxy. Denysenko pays attention to a very important fact that different interpretations of the historical myth of Kyivan Rus by Russia and Ukraine lay in the background of their centennial confrontation. As Russia has derived its historical origins from the medieval state of Kyivan Rus, claiming it as one-national entity, it consistently refuses to acknowledge the existence of other Eastern Slavonic nations, namely Ukraine and Belarus, and pretends to view the unity of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus as the restoration of historical justice. However, based on the evidence offered by well-known historians of Ukraine, Serhii Plokhy and Timothy Snyder, Denysenko shows that Kyivan Rus’ had never constituted a one-national state, but rather a conglomerate of principalities, while Ukrainian ones were also influenced by contacts

3 See, for example, my review of Robert Collins, *Global Tensions in the Russian Orthodox Diaspora* (London; New York: Routledge, 2023).

4 See, Nicholas E. Denysenko, *The Orthodox Church in Ukraine: A Century of Separation* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2018). It was also translated into Ukrainian and published by printing house *Dukh i Litera* in 2019.

with Polish and Lithuanian cultures (p. 2–3). To this point, I would like to add that Ukrainian historians have already established, based on the inscriptions of St Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv⁵ and textual analyses of medieval chronicles,⁶ that the language of inhabitants of Kyiv and other “Ukrainian” principalities of the medieval Rus had many features of a contemporary Ukrainian language, not Russian. So, in contrast to the opinion that Ukrainian language was shaped through encounters of Old Russian and Polish in the 14–15th centuries, it is more likely that the language of 10–12th centuries Rus’ was already proto-Ukrainian. Moreover, it is an established truth that medieval states were built on a dynastical, not national principle. So, the well-established argument of Ukrainian historians sounds as following: just as the empire of Charles the Great was comprised of French, German, and Italian peoples who did not constitute a single ethnicity, the same can be said for Kyivan Rus, which consisted of several Eastern Slavonic nations (it is worth noting that there may have been four nations, not three, if we consider the ethnical group of the Novhorod Republic, which was exterminated by Ivan the Terrible). On later pages, Denysenko rightly explained that the Ecumenical and Moscow Patriarchates kept to different interpretations of the transfer of Kyivan Metropolia in 1686 that was followed, however, by attempts of a forced Russification of the latter (p. 4–6).⁷

In the first chapter (p. 18–36), Denysenko presents the reader with the complex history of Russian-Ukrainian church relations during the imperial period. He points out that Ukraine first served as a provider of Western culture to Russia in the 17th and 18th centuries, while, in response, Ukraine encountered the strong pressure of Russification from the 18th century onward. He pays special attention on music and architecture, in contrast to more traditional focus on education. He also mentions Kyivan theological school of thought and its later assessments in theology. He emphasizes the xenophobic nature of the 19th century Russian nationalism, stating that “The historical context of Uvarov’s triad [autocracy, Orthodoxy, and nationalism] cannot be understated – the appeal to Russian nationalism was designed to repel the

5 For a brief overview of the inscriptions on the walls of St Sophia, see Viacheslav Korniienko, “Uzhe tysiachu rokov tomu Kyiv rozmovliav ukrainskoiu” [“Kyiv Spoke Ukrainian as Long as A Thousand Years Ago”], interview by Svitlana Chorna, *Holos Ukrainy*, April 15, 2020, <http://www.golos.com.ua/article/329961>.

6 See, Oleksandr Palii, “Ukrainska mova: krapochka nad nashym i” [“Ukrainian Language: A Dot Above Our I”], *UNIАН*, November 9, 2011, <https://www.unian.ua/politics/566585-ukrajinska-mova-krapochka-nad-nashim-i.html>. Interestingly enough that personal names, adopted further in Church Slavonic in Russian variant (f.i. Vladimir and Elena) in all these medieval sources sounded definitely Ukrainian (Volodymyr and Olena – respectively).

7 To this point, I would highly recommend reading Maksym Yaremenko, *Pered vyklykamy unifikatsii ta dystsyplinuvannia: Kyivska pravoslavna mytropolia u XVIII stolitti* [Towards the Challenges of Unification and Disciplining: Kyivan Orthodox Metropolia in the 18th Century] (Lviv: Vydavnytstvo Ukrainiskoho Katolytskoho Universytetu, 2017) – a study of how Kyivan clergy tried to oppose to Russification in the 18th century.

kinds of revolts taking place among national minorities, with the Polish uprising in the immediate backdrop” (p. 23). In this chapter Denysenko also elaborates one of the main arguments of his book – the ROC always used ecclesiastical punishments to suppress any kind of Ukrainian movement, either political (as in the case on Hetman Ivan Mazepa), or ecclesiastical (in the case of movements for Ukrainianization of the church). It was an obvious violation of the ecclesial law, as church punishments should be applied only for the heavy moral transgressions, but not for political choices or ethnical preferences. However, the ROC neglected the canonical prescriptions and used penalties against Ukrainians as means of its “soft-power.”

The second chapter (p. 37–58) of the reviewed book traces the church history in the independent Ukraine. The author addresses the creation of different Orthodox Church structures in Ukraine and introduces the reader with the imposition of the *Russian World* ideology in Ukraine. This topic is too vast and can hardly be encompassed in a book chapter. So, Denysenko briefly mentions that “The dissemination of literature in print and digital form through parishes was another means by which the ROC promoted *Russkii Mir*. Parishes received and distributed pamphlets and other literature celebrating the legacy of ‘Holy Rus,’ a nostalgic and romantic reconstruction of the ancestral core of three nations” (p. 53). However, some other important features which were left behind the author’s attention should be mentioned. Namely, the spreading of the cult of Nicholas II and false prophecies of the reportedly God-blessed future of a three-united nation. Not many people are interested to read pamphlets about the medieval “Holy Rus.” However, the veneration of saints and their “teachings” turned to be a more powerful instrument.

Romanov’s cult is a good example here. It is well-known among the historians that later Romanovs had a dubious moral stance. The only person of a truly Christian reputation was the sister of Empress Aleksandra, Elisabeth, who served to the poor and the sick and who was murdered by Bolsheviks. However, while the violent death of the rest of Romanovs family may raise a compassion towards them, the other parts of their life could hardly be interpreted as lives of saints. Nicholas II was infamous for his cruelty to ordinary folk imposing the most terrible punishments on rebels of any kind and promoting repressions of Western Ukrainians during the First World War, while Empress Aleksandra damaged her reputation due to her psychological dependence on depraved “prophet” Rasputin. Despite this hardly a Christian stance, Romanov’s family was very important for the ROC as they were the last symbols of reportedly mighty Empire.⁸ So, the ROC created a cult of Romanovs (not to mention the attempts of glorifying Ivan the Terrible and Stalin) and imposed this cult among the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (hereinafter – UOC MP). What is

8 I am no less critical of the canonization of some “national saints” in other Orthodox Churches. Let us mention, for example, the canonization of Cyril Lucaris by the Alexandrian and Ecumenical Patriarchates or Yaroslav the Wise by the Ukrainian Church. However, these problematic canonizations, at least, are not instrumentalized to become church-imposed cults, as in Romanovs’ case.

particularly problematic is that prayers to saints constitute an important part of everyday spiritual life of Orthodox Christians. So, through this cult they imposed Romanovs, the cruel symbols of the Russian Empire, to everyday life and mentality of many Ukrainians, whom those very Romanovs had oppressed, and thus built a kind of a spiritual bridge.

The other, even more important aspect is a falsification of the prophecies of saints by the ROC. The Orthodox Church keeps to the belief that Holy Spirit still reveals itself in a prophetic gift of some devoted Christians, mostly clerics but laymen as well. Christians with a prophetic gift are often called elders or *starsi*. Nowadays, many Orthodox believers are still trying to ask elders for a spiritual guidance or to know the God's will on most problematic questions of their lives (for example, whether to take monastic vows or wait for a propiariate person to marry). The advice from the elders mostly come true, so many Orthodox have a respect or even blind obedience to the words of the elderly. Knowing this aspect of religious psychology, the ROC created a huge wave of false prophecies attributed to the 20th century Soviet elders. These prophecies proclaim, in the name of God, that only within the unity of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus (and Georgia), the Christian salvation for the post-Soviet folk is possible. The most exemplary case is connected to Lavrentii of Chernihiv (the ancient city in Eastern Ukraine). As historian Serhii Shumylo shows in his survey, the life and prophecies of elder Lavrentii were first published by the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia in 1988 in Germany. In 1994, soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, they were republished in Moscow. The Moscow edition, however, included many prophecies about the will of God for the unity of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, which were completely absent in the German edition. Moreover, contemporaries of elder Lavrentii do not remember him talking such "prophecies." These false prophecies were used by Patriarch Kirill Gundiaev for his justification of Russia's war in Ukraine.⁹ It is quite possible that prophecies of other saints on the same topic were of the same false origin. However, spreading such "prophecies" effectively keeps some Ukrainians afraid of the church (and sometimes political) independence. So, using these and other tactics, the *Russian World* was quite successful in sowing the fear to the souls of some Orthodox Ukrainians and gain their loyalty in reward, the fact to which Denysenko points as well in his book.

The somewhat challenging aspect of this chapter is the attempt to give a brief description of the policies of all the Presidents of independent Ukraine towards the Orthodox churches in Ukraine (p. 49–51). Denysenko tries to show that different Presidents were more favorable for either independent Ukrainian churches (Kravchuk, Yushchenko, and Poroshenko) or the OUC MP (Kuchma and Yanukovich). However,

9 See, Serkhii Shumylo, "Falshyvi 'prorotstva' yak vypravdannya viiny: sektantski mistyfikatsii moskovskoho patriarkha Kyryla" ["False 'Prophecies as Justification of the War: Sectarian Mystifications of Moscow's Patriarch Kirill"], *Radio Svoboda*, November 7, 2022, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/falsyfikatsiyi-patriarkha-kyryla-teolohiya-viyny/32118062.html>.

the reality was much more complicated as, in fact, every President paid due respect to the UOC MP. Moreover, state officials at different levels provided policies favorable for the OUC MP, while not hesitating to use illegal pressure on their opponents. The results of this were quite visible: all three main monasteries (*lavra*-s) and most of the church property in Ukraine belonged to the OUC MP until 2022.¹⁰ At the same time, Denysenko rightly emphasizes the political role of Russia-related oligarchs Nusenkis and Novynskyi within the UOC MP (p. 51).

In the third chapter (p. 59–73), the author describes the rise of Russian nationalistic program within the ROC during the tenure of Kirill Gundiaev, the people's resistance to the restoration of a closer unity with Russia and Belarus during the Euromaidan in Ukraine, and the response of Ukrainian churches and first attempts of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (hereinafter – the EP) to resolve the situation in Ukraine in 2015 (p. 72–73). This reveals that Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew had lasting pastoral concerns and tried to help Ukrainians to create an official independent church even before the Council in Crete in 2016. It is important, since many opponents of Patriarch Bartholomew claim that granting the *tomos* of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in Ukraine (hereinafter – the OCU) in 2018 was a result of his personal revenge to Patriarch Kirill, who refused to participate in the Crete Council and thus undermined its legitimacy. The fact of the 2015 intervention of the EP confirmed that Patriarch Bartholomew acted due to his pastoral love and care for Ukrainians.

The fourth chapter (p. 74–89) deals with case studies illustrating the use of “soft power” by the ROC to eliminate pro-Ukrainian movement in Ukraine. As the author states, “The use of soft power had many manifestations. One was the strategic appointment of Church leaders who were equipped to carry out the ROC's plan in Ukraine. [...] The sharpest tool in the arsenal of soft power was the suspension and removal of Ukrainian clergy who supported autocephaly” (p. 74). Then he analyzed different case studies of such ROC's policies in Ukraine (including the imposition of anathema on metropolitan Filaret) and globally. The last is worth special attention as Denysenko recalls the ROC's “church terrorism” or the creation of the Russian exarchate in Africa as a revenge to the Alexandrian Patriarchate for its recognition of the OCU (p. 86–87).

The fifth chapter (p. 90–110) analyzes the use of hate speech in the informational battles between churches. This time Denysenko first introduces the OUC MP as a victim of hate speech since 2019 (p. 105–07). He sees hate speech in such labels as “Church of the occupant” or “Moscow priests.” However, at the same time, he turns a blind eye to the hate speech from Moscow Patriarchate adherents regarding the OCU, when the latter is called “schismatics,” “STSU” (an abbreviation from *samostiina tserkva* – independent church, that sounds like “I'm peeing” when abbreviated and was never used by the OCU itself) and the like. He does not explore the false accusations

10 See, Liubov Lishchyna, “Yak Lavra distalasia Moskovskomu patriarkhatu” [“How the Moscow Patriarchate Got the Lavra”], *UNIАН*, July 28, 2010, <https://www.unian.ua/politics/384636-yak-lavra-distalasya-moskovskomu-patriarkhatu.html>.

against the OCU made by the OUC MP. They are, mainly, two – that the ordination of the OCU clergy is invalid and that the OCU is a dependent part of the EP, while the OUC MP is “independent.” The first is based on the fact that metropolitan Filaret ordained bishops after his unjust anathemasing by the ROC. However, Patriarch Bartholomew considered Filaret’s appeal and judged his suspension and anathema to be invalid. It means, that Filaret was always a valid bishop with a right to ordain other bishops and clergy. The second accusation is just a lie, because the OCU received the *tomos* of autocephaly, i.e. independence, and not a *hramota* on autonomy. The most controversial statement of this chapter (repeated also a few times later) is that “The state [i.e. Ukraine] has compromised the principles of religious freedom in its quest to expose and remove collaborators from the ranks of the OUC MP” (p. 107). This statement refers to the Security Service checks intended to eliminate collaborators within the church. Given the fact that some clergy of the UOC MP actively participated in war crimes and were collaborators,¹¹ and were infamous for hiding terrorists even before 2022,¹² and that many of the UOC MP bishops have both Ukrainian and Russian citizenship, which constitutes direct breach of the Ukrainian law,¹³ such a statement sounds somewhat scandalous. Can the devastation of the mosque in the Gaza Strip by Israeli armed forces on October 8, 2023, be called an act of restriction of religious freedom? Ukraine does not damage the churches of the OUC MP and does not prohibit the whole church (at the time of writing these review), but Ukraine definitely has the right to perform security checks in some suspected communities. The author also tends to analyze the UOC MP as independent institution, disregarding the fact that it

- 11 See, for example, “Z pochatku povnomasshtabnoi viiny SBU vykryla ponad 60 klirykiv UPTs (MP), yaki pratsiuvaly na rf, prodavaly zbroiu i dytiachu pornografiiu” [“Since the Full-Scale War SSU Exposed More Than 60 Clerics of the UOC (MP), Who Worked for the Russian Federation, Sold Weapons, and Child Pornography”], *The Security Service of Ukraine*, October 4, 2023, <https://ssu.gov.ua/novyny/z-pochatku-povnomasshtabnoi-viiny-sbu-vykryla-ponad-60-klirykiv-upts-mp-yaki-pratsiuvaly-na-rf-prodavaly-zbroiu-i-dytiachu-pornohrafiu>. There are also instances when clergy of the UOC MP gave Russians the information on those in their flock who supported Ukraine. Those laymen were consequently tortured and sometimes killed by Russians. See, for example, “Za materialamy SBU do 12 rokov uviaznennia zasudzheno sviashchennyka UPTs (MP), yakyi ‘zlyvav’ pozytsii ZSU v Severodonetsku” [“The Priest of the OUC MP will Receive 12-year Sentence for Informing about the Positions of Military Forces of Ukraine in Severodonetsk”], *The Security Service of Ukraine*, December 7, 2022, <https://ssu.gov.ua/novyny/za-materialamy-sbu-do-12-rokiv-uviaznennia-zasudzheno-sviashchennyka-upts-mp-yakyi-zlyvav-pozytsii-zsu-v-sievierodonetsku>.
- 12 See, Petro Kraliuk, “‘Kazus Lusvarhi,’ monastyri UPTs (MP), ta natsionalna bezpeka Ukrainy” [“‘Lusvarghi’s Case,’ Monasteries of the OUC MP, and the National Security of Ukraine”], *Radio Svoboda*, May 6, 2018, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/29211614.html>.
- 13 Mykhailo Tkach, “‘Grazhdanin’ Onufrii. ‘Ukrainska pravda’ publikuie rosiiski pasporty sviashchennosluzhyteliv UPTs” [“‘Citizen {of Russia} Onufry.’ Ukrainska Pravda Publishes Russian Passports of the Clergy of the OUC {MP}”], *Ukrainska Pravda*, April 7, 2023, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2023/04/7/7396895/>.

is administered by people, personally connected with Russia. This point invokes my sharpest critique of the book.

The sixth chapter (p. 111–34) explores the political theologies that the ROC, the UOC MP, and the OCU have developed since the full-scale invasion. It also analyzes the moves towards the independence from the ROC within the UOC MP. It presents quite perceptive analysis of the different streams within the UOC MP and its somewhat complicated statements and actual canonical status. In the end, the author acknowledges that “It is clear, however, that the OCU and UOC-MP positions have significant differences. The OCU condemned the *Russkii Mir* and called for a Church tribunal for Kirill [Gundyaev]; the OUC-MP ignored the first and simply ‘disagreed’ with Kirill on the second” (p. 133). However, the actual state of affairs gives some hopes for a possible movement of the OUC-MP towards internal reconciliation of all Orthodox believers in Ukraine.

The last chapter (p. 135–49) deals with the implications of the war in Ukraine on global Orthodoxy and presents some suggestions for reconciliation. Denysenko calls global Orthodoxy to assertive condemnation of the war and for bringing Kirill Gundiaev to responsibility. Otherwise, the churches who keep silence on these issues, being afraid of the pressure from the ROC and their governments, could lose credibility in the eyes of their flock (p. 142). He also proposes three wonderful steps for reconciliation: acknowledgement of the existence of Ukraine, its people and its history, ceasing the false information campaigns, and mutual respect and humility as the basis for the rejoining talks. These indeed would be helpful.

To conclude my review, I would like to add some general remarks. The book is quite short (about 150 pages), which makes it easy to read. Every chapter is adorned by useful references for further reading. I was not able to mention all the important findings of the author even in this relatively long review. So, despite critique of some of the authors conclusions, I would definitely recommend this book as a must-read to all those who want to understand the complex religious situation in Ukraine.